

The Meaning of Baranagar

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The dastardly murder on February 20 of Hemanta Kumar Basu, the 76-year-old chairman of the All-India Forward Bloc and a veteran of the country's freedom struggle, stirred the conscience of this State's people as nothing before during the entire period of violent lunacy that has come to hold West Bengal in its grip. The spontaneous expressions of grief and condemnation which immediately after the murder brought normal life in Calcutta and parts of the State to a standstill were not merely a respectful homage to the personal qualities of the departed leader whose simple life of dedication was really exemplary. These demonstrations also reflected the pent-up feelings of dismay mingled with wrath against the degeneration of political struggles into a war of gangsters. The leaders of the political parties were wise enough to sense the new mood of the people. Spokesmen of all the political parties from the CPI(M) to the Congress(O) unreservedly condemned the crime, with the usual wordy barbs against one another somewhat subdued. All the parties also hastened to give a call for Bangla *bandh* on February 22 to condemn the murder and the general violence in the State's political life.

However welcome as signs of an urge to return to political sanity, it would definitely be naive to exaggerate the significance of the initial reactions of the political parties. The logic of events in the recent past and the rivers of blood already shed will continue to exert a powerful negative influence over future developments. Whether the traumatic shock of the murder of the respected veteran leads to a reversal of the present course or actually to a further aggravation of violence remains to be seen.

Bureaucracy's Role

Moreover, the intervention by forces outside of the political parties in the political life of West Bengal should not be minimised. Elements in the bureaucracy and the

police, interested in perpetuating their autocratic rule over the State, would not entirely disapprove of an aggravation of violence which may eventually lead to an indefinite postponement of the polls. There are many indications that through acts of omission and commission, the police in many areas have been adding fuel to the fire of the civil war among the political parties.

Indeed, there is some evidence of a new self-confidence among these sections of the State's administration. Police atrocities which had somewhat subsided after the great public protests against the alleged cold blooded shooting of four youngmen at Beliaghata and the mysterious Barasat mass murders, (in which a *prima facie* case of involvement against police remains unshaken) have again been reported to be rampant. Recently about 2,000 residents of the Beliaghata area marched in procession to the Secretariat Building to hand over a memorandum to the Principal Adviser to the Governor complaining that another group of five political workers of the locality were dragged by the police from their houses and murdered openly.

Communist Gang War

Even more damaging evidence of the deep game is the apparently inspired report published as a lead story in *The Statesman*, Calcutta, about rethinking in the top administrative circles about the wisdom of holding the election in the present climate in West Bengal. It is significant that the Chief Election Commissioner, the only legally empowered authority to take a decision on the question, disclaimed any knowledge about such confabulations and firmly declared his intention to stick to the present schedule.

However, the machinations in the administrative quarters are secondary and contributory factors only. The present malady in West Bengal's politics basically stems from the fragmentation of the communist movement into three mutually hostile parties, the CPI(M), the CPI and the CPI(ML). All the distortions in the State's political life — from the break up of the UF to the wars of physical extermination — are directly traceable to the split. The domination that has now come to be exercised by the organised underworld over social and political life in greater Calcutta is in direct proportion to the deterioration of relations between the segments of the erstwhile integral communist movement. There is little prospect of any improvement in this direction. If anything, the situation will possibly worsen further in the course of the election campaign.

Anti-Jyoti Basu Gang Up

The immediate prospects in the sphere of intra-communist relations can be gauged from the goings-on in the Baranagar constituency in the northern suburbs of Calcutta. This constituency has come to acquire a great significance on the political map of the State because Jyoti Basu, the most popular mass leader in West Bengal and the leader of the CPI(M) Assembly Party, has held this seat uninterruptedly since 1952 in spite of massive challenges from the Congress in every election in the past. Both the CPI and the CPI(ML) have this time come forward to join the traditional anti-communist forces in their bid to dislodge Basu from this prestige seat. The CPI which had earlier pitted a candidate of its own against Basu withdrew him when Ajoy Mukherji filed his nomination papers for contesting from Baranagar (in addition to the safe constituency in his home town, Tamluk, in Midnapore) and other parties including Jan Sangh and Congress(O) extended their support to Mukherji against Basu.

While the CPI has been lending mainly its political support to Ajoy Mukherji against Jyoti Basu, the CPI(ML) activists have joined the strong arm squads of all anti-CPI(M) parties including those owing allegiance to Congress(O) to make it impossible for CPI(M) workers to enter into large parts of the constituency. So, if Jyoti Basu is eventually worsted in his traditional base, it will be to a large measure due to the contributions of his erstwhile comrades. If, on the contrary, he can manage to squeeze through in spite of the present constellation of forces, it will be a new feather in the CPI(M)'s cap.

Whatever be the ultimate poll result, it cannot but have a major impact on intra-communist relations and on West Bengal politics in general.